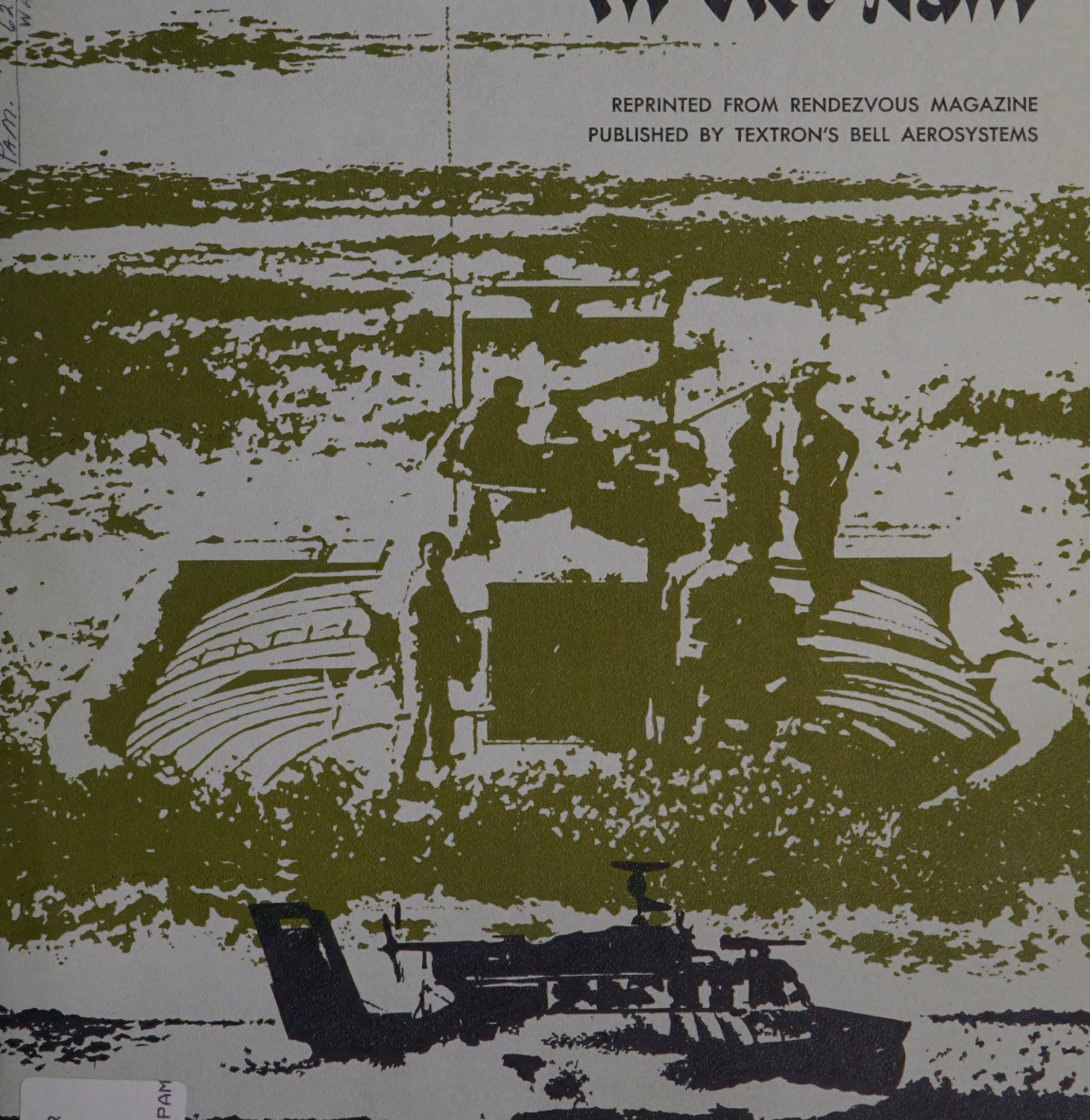


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# History of ACV's in Viet Nam

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# Skimmers





**T**HE day of the big battles in Viet Nam seems about over. Under steady U. S. pressure, the battered Viet Cong cadres are pulling back to bandage their wounds. As their threat to Saigon lessens, the warfare to reassert the little nation's independence appears to be entering a new phase.

The Viet Cong grip on most of the Mekong Delta must be pried loose next. Until this is done, no government of South Viet Nam can be secure or even viable. For here live most of its people and here sprout the rich rice fields that provide a basis for the nation's economy.

The campaign to break the Viet Cong's control of the rural countryside will necessarily be slow. Guerrilla warfare is hit-and-run, with the black-pajama-clad attackers emerging from the native population for a strike and then melting back into it. Screening for hostile elements will have to proceed from one thatched hut to the next, hamlet by hamlet.

"We will have to take one small bite at a time," Lt. Gen. Jonathan Seaman, commander of U.S. Field Force One, said recently. The area to be pacified is about the size of the state of Louisiana.

Even if there were no snipers or booby traps, movement would be difficult through what the U.S. soldiers call "Charlie's country." There are virtually no roads through the dense tropical undergrowth and twisted mangrove swamps. During the monsoons, the flooded country side isolates villages; when the rains drain off, they leave treacherous mud flats behind.

Such terrain is as difficult as any in which the U.S. military has ever operated. Helicopters are useful as aerial gun platforms, but they dare not let their skids settle down into soft mud in which they will become permanently bogged. The shift from "Search and Destroy" missions to "Search and Interrogate" patrols demands a new form of armed vehicle,

capable of moving with equal facility across water, swampland, mud and hard ground.

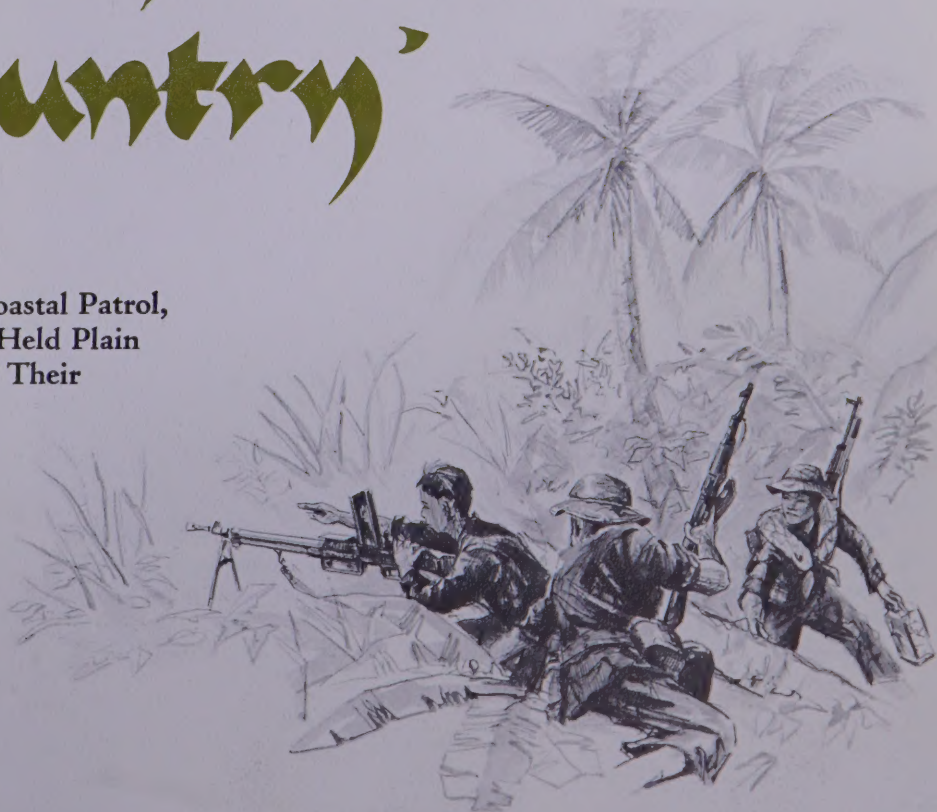
The search for such an amphibious vehicle—preferably, one that can be heavily armed to fend off surprise guerrilla attack—is developing into a basic strategic need for the United States. For terrain similar to Viet Nam exists in many parts of the world where we might conceivably be involved one day in military action: in Laos, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, even parts of Central and South America.

So far, the craft which has shown itself to be most at home in the "rice-monsoon country" is the air cushion vehicle. Raised four feet above the surface by rubber skirts containing air under pressure, the skimmer can speed across dry land, mud or open water at up to 70 mph. Yet at the wave of the commander's hand, it can settle down anywhere (large floats are built into the structure for

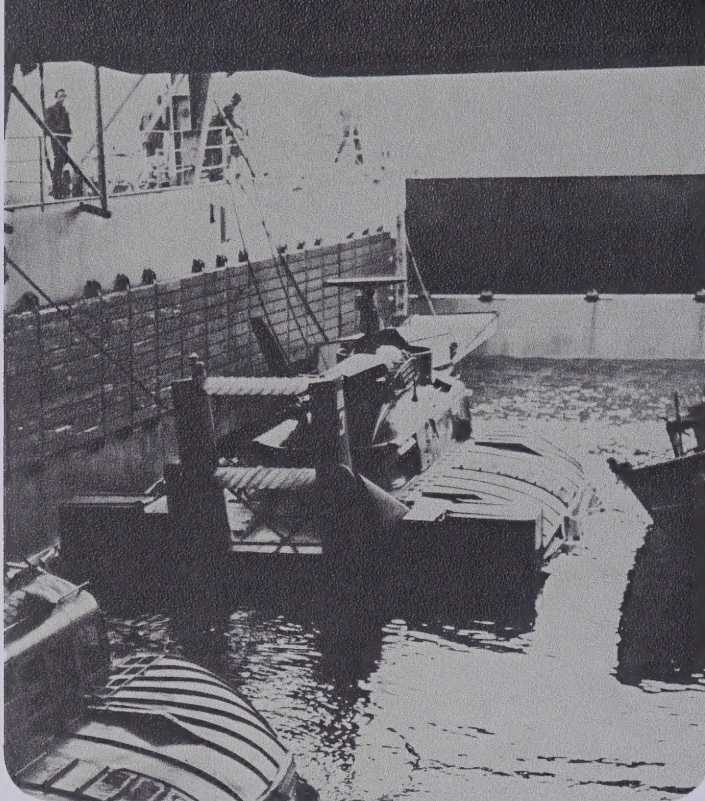
# Invade 'Charlie's Country'

by Ralph Wallenhorst

**Navy Detaches ACVs from Coastal Patrol,  
Sends Them Across Guerrilla-Held Plain  
of Reeds in Continuing Test of Their  
Military Capabilities**

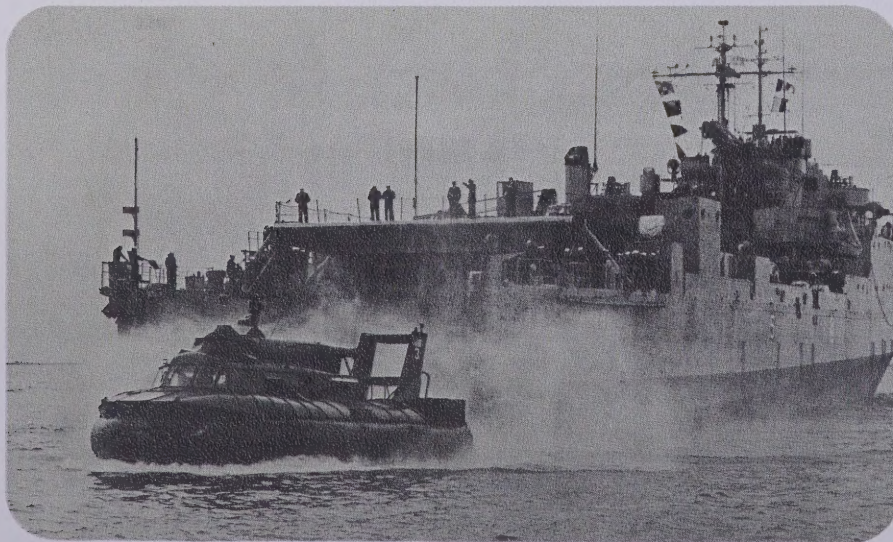






PACVs berthed in the well deck of the LSD Tortuga while operating off the coast of Viet Nam. (These photos taken during return of the craft to the U. S.)

## ... *Patrolling Coastal Waters*



Painted shark's mouth grinning on its bow, PACV roars out of well deck as it did in patrols against Viet Cong who were attempting to smuggle supplies by junk and sampan.

water buoyancy) while the troops aboard disembark for extended on-the-spot investigation or deployment.

Proof of the skimmers' unique anti-guerrilla capability came in the closing months of 1966, on Viet Nam's Plain of Reeds. Previously, the skimmers had been patrolling over open water and in riverways; the highly successful inland operation was set in motion on short notice, as another step in determining the best use for the craft.

For the Viet Nam program, the U.S. Navy had acquired three Model SK-5s from Bell Aerosystems; the \$2.6 million contract was awarded by the Bureau of Ships in July 1965. The craft, 39 feet long and 22 feet 9 inches wide, carry 4,300 pounds as "normal payload."

About 40 men were eventually to make up PACV (for Patrol Air Cushion Vehicle) Division 107. The majority began training in September 1965 at Bell Aerosystems' skimmer base in the Buffalo harbor on Lake Erie. In an effort to make the Naval designation pronounceable, they began calling the craft—which had numbers, but no names — the "Pak-Vs."

In November they moved to the Fleet Amphibious Base at Coronado Beach, near San Diego. There they were joined by their commanding officer, Lt. Kenneth H. Luenser, 33. A veteran of 2 years enlisted service and 6½ years commissioned service, he had previously been navigator of an amphibious attack transport and chief engineer of a destroyer.

At Coronado the PACV operators tested out techniques for bucking through the heavy Pacific Ocean surf. Crews began proficiency training for combat zone operations. Gunners got in some shooting practice with their .50 caliber machine gun, mounted in a turret atop the cabin, at a variety of still and moving targets.

Then the crews shipped out for Viet Nam, most of them arriving in April 1966. Their Pak-Vs arrived about May 1, ferried aboard an LSD.

PACV Division 107's first operations were conducted from their base at Cat Lo. "We boarded and searched sampans and junks in a reasonably friendly area," says Lt. Luenser. As for the difference between a sampan and a junk, he gives the standard Vietnamese definition: "If you can put a water buffalo in it athwartships, it's a junk; anything smaller is a sampan."

After about a month of this, the



Pak-Vs moved out into "hostile environment." They became part of Operation Market Time, the surveillance of coastal traffic. Its tasks: to prevent the movement of Viet Cong contraband, and to facilitate the efforts by the friendly populace to bring their goods to the cities.

The Pak-Vs remained at sea, operating from the USS Tortuga. This 9,000-ton LSD is built around a "well" which runs like a huge square-sided tunnel most of the length of the ship. To afford access, the "gate" at the end would be opened and the Pak-Vs would roar in or out. Speaking of the operation to fellow officers, Lt. Luenser has been overheard to say: "That'll make you pull your hair out — going into an LSD at night, no lights, no bumpers, 6 to 8 foot seas, and a 20-knot cross wind." Despite his concern, however, the Pak-Vs managed the transit successfully several times each day.

Then the base of the Pak-Vs was switched to the beach at Cat Lo. "The Coast Guard and the Swift Boats had shot up a steel hull trawler," Lt. Luenser recalls. "It had a lot of arms and ammunition aboard. They had to load all this stuff on the LSD and we had to leave to make room."

The crews took the opportunity to make some changes in the skimmers, dictated by combat-area experience. Their armament was increased — "We hadn't drawn any fire, but there was every possibility that we could in that area" — and the search light remounted so it would swivel with the turret guns for night-time interceptions.

Soon after the Pak-Vs returned to service, they were reassigned to Operation Game Warden. This is a companion effort to Market Time, patrolling the rivers of the Mekong Delta instead of the open seas.

"The Viet Cong would lie along river banks and wait for the craft to pass by," Lt. Thomas M. Graves, 27, of Detroit, recounts. "Then they'd open up with 200-300 rounds. This happened quite frequently. Fortunately, they were poor shots. Our crews reacted so quickly that we were able to suppress the firing in every case. Also, I think our speed had quite a bit to do with our not getting hit."

Lt. Graves recalls vividly another occasion, when they received word a little girl had been badly burned in an area sacked by the Viet Cong. "We went out and got her and made the 16 mile run back to the military



## Skilled Officers

Lt. Kenneth H. Luenser  
Commander,  
PACV Division 107



Lt. Roy Adair Jr.



Lt. Thomas Graves



Lt. (j.g.) Frank McCollum

## Typical Crewmen



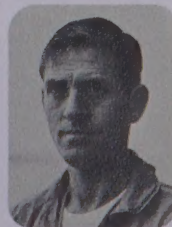
Engineman  
Jerry Jordan



Shipfitter  
M. E. Bower



Yeoman  
L. R. Hickingbottom Jr.



Gunner's Mate  
F. E. Rutledge



Engineman  
B. A. Van Tiger



## QUAI VAT RESULTS

"One of the Special Forces people that were in the air boats, in a little closer than we were, said he saw the machine gun that was shooting at us. When our gunner returned the fire, it apparently split this machine gun right down the middle. The Special Forces captain told me that what caught his eye was the steel flying around and the man shooting it being up-ended."

There were no fires visible inside the water-logged village, Lt. Luenser said. The combined force of Pak-Vs, helicopters and swamp buggies continued on its patrol without attempting to occupy it or stage a hut-to-hut search.

The Pak-Vs were out on Operation Quai Vat from Nov. 20 to 26, stood down for two days for repairs and overhaul, and took the field again Nov. 29 through Dec. 5. Lt. Luenser lost count of how many miles they traveled or how many times they ranged back and forth across the Plain of Reeds, seeking the Viet Cong.

"One Green Beret captain with us told me that the area we covered in the last three days of our operation, he would have had to take three months to cover."

The rugged Pak-Vs logged a total of 1,063 hours of operation during their Viet Nam service — 272 hours, 385 hours and 406 hours, respectively, for the three craft. Not one was lost to enemy action or the grueling terrain.

During Operation Quai Vat, the crews didn't attempt much repair

During Operation Quai Vat on the Plain of Reeds, the PACV force was officially credited with 23 Viet Cong killed in action. The PACVs destroyed 71 enemy sampans, 71 land structures and a printing press used for Communist propaganda. A total of 194 bunkers were discovered and checked out. The PACVs captured 11 Viet Cong soldiers, 200 rounds of small arms ammunition, 33 hand grenades, 5 rifles, 6 outboard motors, and 60 pounds of enemy documents.

work in the field "because we were in Charlie's land and we knew it." What repairs could not be postponed were made quickly, on the spot, "and more or less jerry-built. This is one place where simplicity in a machine is the saving grace."

On one occasion, the cable which controls the pitch of the variable pitch propeller broke. "A member of the crew took off the port cover near the propeller and operated the levers controlling the pitch by hand. He wore a headset and the pilot would radio him 'Forward' and 'Back.' It took us about an hour, working this way, to get back to Moc Hoa where we could make regular repairs."

On another occasion, a rudder control broke. The crew rigged cables from the rudder to both sides of the forward portion of the craft. There other crewmen, wearing headsets to hear the pilot's commands, would pull the cables to turn the rudder right or left and thus steer the craft.

On still another occasion, one craft was feared permanently out of action. However, the maintenance officer dropped by Lt. Luenser's quarters later and announced that he'd fixed it, making the necessary shim out of a flattened beer can. "It's still in there; they'll find it when they repair the craft at San Diego or Buffalo," Lt. Luenser says, shaking his head in amazement.

Showing the scars of their eight months of service in Viet Nam, the three skimmers were returned to the United States in January. They were brought home aboard the USS Gunston Hall, an LSD like the USS Tortuga. Also in its well deck were two junks, gift of the Viet Nam navy, for use in practicing boarding and search.

Meanwhile, the name of PACV Division 107 has been changed to Coastal Division 17. All of its members returned home for a 30-day leave. Two days after Christmas, Lt. Luenser married the former Joan Blythe of Philadelphia.

All three of the skimmers that fought in Viet Nam are on station at Coronado Naval Amphibious Base; the Navy has made no announcement as to their future use.

However, it is likely that the Viet Cong have not seen the last of the Pak-Vs. Operation Quai Vat was just the beginning. Heavily-armed air cushion vehicles, speeding disdainfully across swamplands and dry terrain alike, may turn out to be the patrol vehicles which will hasten the end of guerrilla warfare. ■

Air cushion vehicles were used as ambulances for villagers injured by Viet Cong in terror attacks. They transported victims to the nearest hospitals at 60 knots.

